Moral thought and action in sport and student life

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Abstract

Game Reasoning Theory (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986a) contends that moral reasoning regresses to a more selfish stage of moral development in sport compared to everyday life. The view that moral reasoning is moderated by context (*bracketed morality*) came from analyzing responses to dilemmas set in sport and life contexts that concerned moral issues about harm and fairness. The phenomenon has been extended to moral behavior: frequency of antisocial and prosocial behavior differs between sport and life. Evidence that the sign of the difference depends on the insider-outsider status of the recipient of the behavior highlights how in-group loyalty principles can influence bracketed moral behavior. To prove this explanation, the present study assessed moral behavior and moral reasoning in sport and life contexts in college athletes. Participants responded to moral dilemmas by indicating the likelihood that they would act antisocially or prosocially and rating the moral wrongness of action/inaction. They also reported the frequency of carrying out the same behaviors in the past few months. Likelihood of antisocial opponent/student behavior (intimidation) was more frequent in sport than life whereas antisocial teammate/student (criticism) and prosocial opponent behaviors (help) were less frequent in sport than life. The sport-life difference for intimidation likelihood was fully mediated by moral wrongness and past moral behavior whereas the difference in helping was partially mediated by wrongness. These findings confirm cross-context linkages between moral thought and action and reveal a more nuanced aspect to bracketed morality that considers in-group loyalty when understanding moral reasoning and behavior in sport and life.

Keywords: behavior, bracketed morality, in-group loyalty, game reasoning

Moral Thought and Action in Sport and Life: A Study of Bracketed Morality

Sport is a social context which poses moral dilemmas between individuals and groups of individuals surrounding principles of care/harm, fairness/cheating and loyalty/betrayal (for reviews, see Kavussanu, 2008, 2012). The belief that professional sportsmen and sportswomen could or should serve as moral role models for their fans and supporters is a popular one. It is perhaps with a sense of schadenfreude that the media report stories about the misdemeanors of athletes in their everyday lives. The relative merits of these contrasting views – the athlete as saint or sinner – have remarkably little supporting evidence one way or the other. Indeed, aside from occasional anecdotal reports, we know surprisingly little about the consistency of athletes' moral conduct in and away from the sporting arena (for review see Kimble, Russo, Bergman, & Galindo, 2010). The present research was designed to improve our understanding of this issue.

Bredemeier and her colleagues pioneered the study of whether sport has its own morality. Participants were presented with moral dilemmas about harm and fairness, and their moral reasoning was classified, based on Haan's (1978) *interactional theory of moral development*, as being assimilative (favoring their own needs), accommodative (favoring the needs of others), or equilibrative (considering everyone's needs). Bredemeier and Shields (1984) reported that sport-based (game) reasoning was more egocentric than life reasoning among high school and college athletes and non-athletes. Based on further analysis of part of this dataset, Bredemeier and Shields (1986a) reported a slight shift in the distribution of assimilative, accommodative and equilibrative reasoning from 13%, 84% and 3% in the life context to 24%, 75% and 1% in the sport context. This evidence was used by Bredemeier and Shields (1986a, 1986b) to formulate the concept of *bracketed morality*, referring to the transitory adoption of more egocentric moral reasoning in sport compared to everyday life. In a follow-up study, Bredemeier (1994, 1995) posed moral dilemmas to investigate moral

reasoning in sport and daily life among children, aged 10-13 years, who were enrolled on a summer sports camp. She found that the older children, aged 12 and 13, exhibited more egocentric moral reasoning in sport than life. Taken together, these findings suggest that sport-life differences in moral reasoning are sometimes evident among adolescents and young adults.

The *theory of game reasoning* was formulated from data generated when participants were presented with moral dilemmas set in sport and life contexts. The first protocol (Bredemeir, 1984, Bredemeier & Shields, 1986a, 1986b) posed two sport-based dilemmas that concerned (a) a football player instructed by his coach to injure an opponent, and (b) a basketball player who decided whether to help an endangered opponent who played dirty, and two life-based dilemmas that concerned (c) a middle-aged married man involved with his young secretary, and (d) a person deciding whether to keep a promise and repay someone who needed the money to help his hungry family. Thus, differences in the content and issues raised by the dilemmas in the two contexts could have contributed to the reported sport-life differences in moral reasoning. Accordingly, the second protocol (Bredemeier, 1994, 1995) posed two dilemmas concerning (a) boys deciding whether to harm another boy acting unfairly, and (b) girls choosing between being honest and keeping a promise to a friend, with versions of each adapted for both sport and life contexts. The findings generated by these two protocols provided the empirical foundation for *game reasoning theory*. Thus, the evidence for game reasoning is rather limited in both content (i.e., to a few dilemmas) and extent (i.e., to subsamples of two datasets). Given that game reasoning has never been independently replicated in the thirty years since it was first reported further investigation of this widely-cited phenomenon is clearly warranted.

The aforementioned papers by Bredemeir and Shields only examined differences in moral reasoning, or how participants think about moral issues in sport and daily life. In an extension

of this line of research, Kavussanu, Boardley, Sagar and Ring (2013) recently investigated whether bracketed morality in sport extends to moral behavior. Two large studies compared the frequency of prosocial and antisocial behavior in sport (toward opponents and teammates) and life (toward other students at university). Prosocial behavior comprises actions intended to benefit or help another (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998), such as encouraging or helping an opponent. Antisocial behavior comprises actions intended to disadvantage or harm another (Sage, Kavussanu, & Duda, 2006), such as cheating and trying to injure an opponent. Kavussanu and her colleagues found that the college athletes exhibited higher antisocial behavior toward opponents, lower prosocial behavior toward opponents, and higher prosocial behavior toward teammates in sport than toward other students at university. These findings extended the concept of bracketed morality to the moral behavior of college athletes. Importantly, they underscore the importance of distinguishing the status of the targets of the behaviors in question and thereby paint a more complex picture of the ways in which morality (moral thought and action) may be influenced by different social environments. The psychology of group dynamics concerning in-group loyalty and out-group disloyalty tells us that people act favorably toward members of their group and unfavorably towards outsiders (e.g., Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Interestingly, in-group loyalty has been laid down as a cornerstone ethical principle in moral foundations theory by Haidt and colleagues (e.g., Graham, Haidt, Koleva, Motyl, Iyer, Wojcik, & Ditto, 2013). In sum, the in-group versus out-group distinction should help enhance our understanding of bracketed moral reasoning and behavior.

The present report was designed to investigate Bredemeier and Shields' (1986a, 1986b) theory of game reasoning and had two purposes. The first purpose was to determine whether intended antisocial (harming) and prosocial (caring) behavior directed towards in-group and out-group individuals, moral reasoning, and past behavior differed between sport and life

contexts. The second purpose was to explore whether current moral reasoning or past behavior mediated any effects of context on intended behavior. Our hypotheses were tested using new analyses performed on a larger dataset (see Kavussanu, et al., 2013, Study 2).

Method

Participants

Participants were male (n = 210) and female (n = 162) student athletes who played team sport (American football, basketball, field hockey, netball, and soccer) for a university club. These sports have been classified as medium-to-high contact sports with high potential to raise moral issues (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Cooper, 1986). These young adults (M = 19.82, SD = 1.53 years) had competed in their sport for an average of 7.40 (SD = 4.55) years.

Dilemmas: Intended Behavior and Wrongness

Moral dilemmas about issues of harm and care were used to assess intended moral action and moral reasoning. Each scenario was modified for sport and life contexts. The dilemmas were adapted from previous research (e.g., Kavusanu & Roberts, 2001; Stanger et al., 2012, 2013; Stephens, 2000) and described an intentional (deliberate) antisocial act aiming to harm another person or a prosocial act aiming to help another person. To assess behavioral intentions, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood that they would act as described in each dilemma on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all likely*, 7 = *extremely likely*) as per previous studies (e.g., Stanger, et al., 2013; Stephens, 2000; Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996). Participants were also asked to rate how morally wrong it would be to act antisocially (intimidation and criticism dilemmas) or fail to act prosocially (stop to help and lending dilemmas) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all wrong*, 7 = *extremely wrong*). The four pairs of dilemmas were as follows:

1. Intimidation Dilemma (antisocial behavior toward an opponent / a student). The sport context read: *"During a regular game, a player from the opposing team tries to wind you up by repeatedly making annoying remarks about you. When the referee is not looking, you have the opportunity to physically intimidate him/her."* The life context read: *"You are in a pub and one of your friends has brought a friend whom you don't know. This person tries to wind you up by repeatedly making annoying remarks about you. When nobody can see you, you have the opportunity to physically intimidate him/her."* After reading each dilemma, they were asked *"How likely are you to physically intimidate this player / person?"* and *"Do you think that physically intimidating this player / person is morally wrong?"* which they answered by providing likelihood and wrongness ratings on the 7-point scales described above.
2. Criticism Dilemma (antisocial behavior toward a teammate / student). The sport context read: *"During a regular game, one of your teammates makes a mistake, which costs your team the game. After the game, you have the opportunity to criticize him/her."* The life context read: *"During a class presentation by your group, one of the group members makes a mistake, which costs your group a high mark. After the class, you have the opportunity to criticize him/her."* They were then asked "*How likely are you to criticize this teammate / student?"* and *"Do you think that criticizing this teammate / student is morally wrong?"*
3. Stop to Help Dilemma (prosocial behavior toward an opponent / a student). The sport context read: *"During a regular game, an opposing player falls to the ground. He/she appears hurt and in need of help. Your team has the ball and is in a scoring position. You are the only one who has seen the player's distress. You have the opportunity to ask your teammate to stop play."* The life context read: *"You are on your way to give a class presentation when you see a student fall to the ground. He/she appears hurt and in need*

of help. You are the only person who has seen him/her in distress, but if you stop you may be late for your presentation. You have the opportunity to go over and help this student." They were then asked *"How likely are you to ask your teammate to stop play / go over and help this student?"* and *"Do you think that refraining from asking your teammate to stop play / ignoring this student is morally wrong?"*

4. Lending Dilemma (prosocial behavior toward an opponent /a student). The sport context read: *"Before a regular home game, the opposing team's captain tells you that they did not bring suitable kit. Thus, they cannot play, and your team will win the game by default. You have the opportunity to lend your opponents your spare kit."* The life context read: *"A student whom you do not know well has lost his/her lecture notes. He/she needs to study for next week's test and asks you to lend him/her your notes overnight to copy. You have the opportunity to lend this student your notes."* They were then asked *"How likely are you to lend your opponents your spare kit / this student your notes?"* and *"Do you think that refusing to lend your opponents your spare kit / this student your notes is morally wrong?"*

Past Antisocial and Prosocial Behavior

Three items from the Prosocial and Antisocial Behavior in Sport Scale (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009; Kavussanu, Stanger & Boardley, 2013) were used to assess past antisocial behavior towards opponents and students (*"physically intimidated an opponent / a student"),* antisocial behavior towards teammates and students (*"criticized an opponent / a student"*), and prosocial behavior toward opponents and students (*"asked to stop play when an opponent was injured / sought help for a student who was hurt"*). Participants were asked to think about their experiences – *when playing sport this season / with other students this academic year* – and indicate how often they engaged in each behavior. Responses were

made on a scale anchored by 1 (*never*) and 5 (*very often*). There was no item concerning lending behavior.

Procedure

After obtaining approval from university ethics committee and permission from the clubs and head coaches, student athletes were approached by one of two research assistants. Data were collected either before or after a training session. Data collection started two months into the sporting season and university term and took place over a three-month period. The students were informed of the study's aims, that participation was voluntary, honesty in responses was vital, and data would be kept strictly confidential and would be used only for research purposes. After signing an informed consent form, volunteers completed the sport-based section of the protocol followed by the life-based section of the protocol, or vice versa, with the order counterbalanced across participants.

Results

Moral Thought and Action in Sport and Life

The first purpose of the present study was to compare the moral action and moral reasoning of male and female student athletes in sport and life contexts. The likelihood and wrongness data from the dilemmas are displayed in **Figure 1**. The results of the Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs), with Context (sport, life) as the within-subjects factor and Gender (male, female) as the between-subjects factor, on each variable are summarized in **Table 1**. Main effects for context were noted for intended antisocial and prosocial behavior. Intimidatory antisocial opponent/student behavior ($M_{sport} = 3.05 > M_{life} = 2.72$) was more likely to happen in sport than life whereas criticizing antisocial teammate/student behavior

(M_{sport} = 2.64 < M_{life} = 3.03) and stopping to help prosocial opponent/student behavior (M_{sport} = 4.24 < M_{life} = 5.57) were less likely to happen in the sport context. Gender differences emerged for some behaviors. Specifically, males were most likely to intimidate opponents/student (M_{male} = 3.29 > M_{female} = 2.48) and least likely to stop to help opponents/students (M_{male} = 4.65 < M_{female} = 5.22). A solitary context × gender interaction was found for intended prosocial behavior (i.e., stopping to help an injured person): both genders were less likely to help in sport than life whereas males indicated that they were less likely to help than females in the sport context but equally likely to help in the life context.

The wrongness judgments for each dilemma were evaluated using ANOVA (**Table 1).** Antisocial behavior toward opponents/students (intimidation) was judged to be less wrong in sport (M_{sport} = 4.35 < M_{life} = 4.74) whereas prosocial inaction was judged to be less wrong for stopping to help (M_{sport} = 4.43 < M_{life} = 5.60) and more wrong for lending (M_{sport} = 4.58 > M_{life} = 4.21) in the sport context. Similarly, males deemed it less wrong to act antisocially (M_{male} = 4.00 < M_{female} = 5.09) and to fail to act prosocially (stop to help: M_{male} = 4.81 < M_{female} = 5.22; lending: M_{male} = 4.23 < M_{female} = 4.57) towards opponents/students compared to females.

The influence of context and gender on the frequency of intimidation, criticism, and stopping to help behavior in the past season/term are summarized in **Table 1**. Main effects for context and gender were noted for each behavior. Intimidation (antisocial opponent/student behavior) was more frequent (M_{sport} = 2.15 > M_{life} = 1.49), criticism (antisocial teammate/student behavior) less frequent (M_{sport} = 1.92 < M_{life} = 2.16), and stopping to help someone (prosocial opponent/student behavior) was less frequent (M_{sport} = 2.49 < M_{life} = 2.74) in the sport than the life context. Compared to females, the males engaged more frequently in intimidation (M_{male} = 1.96 > M_{female} = 1.68), more frequently in criticism (M_{male} = 2.17 > M_{female} = 1.92), and less frequently in stopping to help someone in need (M_{male} =

2.44 < M_{female} = 2.80). The interaction effect reflected the finding that men intimidated more often than women in a sport but not a life context.

Mediation of Intended Behavior by Moral Reasoning and Past Behavior

The second purpose of the present study was to determine whether the effect of context on intended moral behavior was mediated by current moral reasoning and past moral behavior. This was undertaken using within-subjects mediation (Judd, Kenny, & McClelland, 2001). We also investigated moderation as this is an integral part of the analysis. We conducted multiple linear regression analyses predicting the sport-life difference in intended likelihood to behave from the corresponding sport-life difference in wrongness judgments across contexts and the mean-centered sum of the wrongness judgments in the two contexts. Mediation is inferred when the context *difference* in a predictor predicts the difference in the outcome: It is deemed full (or partial) when the intercept is not (or remains) significantly different from zero. Finally, moderation is affirmed when the mean-centered *sum* predicts the difference in the outcome (Judd et al., 2001).

Moral Reasoning. In the case of intimidation of opponents/students, the sport-life difference in likelihood to behave was negatively predicted by the associated change in the wrongness judgment, B = –0.39, 95% CI [–0.49, –0.29], t = 7.53, p < .001. The intercept was not significantly different from zero, B = 0.13, 95% CI [–0.42, 0.68], t = 0.47, p = .64, indicating that moral reasoning was a full mediator of the effect of context on this intended antisocial opponent/student behavior. No moderation occurred. In the case of stopping to help opponents/students, the sport-life difference in likelihood to behave was positively predicted by the associated change in the wrongness judgment, B = 0.34, 95% CI [0.24, 0.43], t = 6.90, p < .001. That the intercept remained significantly different from zero, B = –2.01, 95% CI [–2.86, –1.16], t = 4.66, p < .001, indicated that moral reasoning was a partial mediator of the

effect of context on this intended prosocial opponent/student behavior. Finally, the mean-centered sum of judged wrongness of inaction positively predicted (i.e., moderated) the difference in likely prosocial opponent/student behavior, $B = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.18], $t = 2.56$, $p < .02$; thus, the lower their overall moral righteousness the less likely was the person to stop and help in sport than life.

Past Behavior. In the case of intimidation of opponents/students, the sport-life difference in likelihood to behave was positively predicted by the associated change in past behavior, $B = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.35], $t = 2.27$, $p < .03$. The intercept was not significantly different from zero, $B = –0.41$, 95% CI [–0.89, 0.08], $t = 1.65$, $p = .10$, indicating that past behavior was a full mediator of the effect of context on future intimidatory behavior. The mean-centered sum of past intimidation positively predicted the difference in likely future behavior, $B = 0.16$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.29], $t = 2.44$, $p < .02$; thus, there was moderation whereby the more frequently the person intimidated others in the past the more likely were they to intimidate more often in sport than life. In the case of criticism of teammates/students, the mean-centered sum of past behavior positively predicted the difference in likely criticism of opponents/students, $B = –1.21$, 95% CI [–1.75,–0.66], $t = 4.34$, $p < .001$, signaling moderation: intended criticism was less in sport than life among those who overall were more critical. No mediation occurred for criticism. Finally, stopping to help was moderated by past behavior, $B = –2.17$, 95% CI [–2.80,–1.54], $t = 6.75$, $p < .001$, such that failing to stop and help someone was less in sport than life among those who overall helped less.

Discussion

The present study evaluated bracketed morality of thought and action by comparing the moral reasoning and behavior in sport and life of college athletes. With regard to the study's first purpose, we found sport-life differences in intended moral behavior, moral reasoning,

and past moral behavior. The study provided evidence of bracketed moral behavior: responses to the moral dilemmas indicated that intimidation of opponents/students was more likely to happen in sport than life whereas criticizing teammates/students and stopping to help opponents/students were less likely to happen in the sport context. Responses to the moral dilemmas also provided evidence of game reasoning: harm (intimidation) was judged to be less wrong in sport whereas lack of caring was judged to be less wrong for stopping to help and more wrong for lending in the sport context. Further, based on recall of their own recent past behavior in sport and life, the participants reported that they intimidated opponents more than students at university, criticized teammates less than students, and helped opponents less than students. With regard to the study's second purpose, the higher likelihood of harm during sport was mediated by moral reasoning and past moral behavior whereas the lower likelihood of care during sport was mediated by moral reasoning. The mediation analyses provided novel evidence linking bracketed moral reasoning and past moral behavior with likelihood of acting badly, revealing a close coupling between moral thought and action across the sport and life contexts. The present data replicate, extend, and qualify Bredemeir and Shields' (1986a, 1986b) *theory of game reasoning*.

The findings that intended and past antisocial behavior directed towards opponents were more likely when playing sport than the equivalent intimidatory behavior directed towards students at university provides further support for bracketed moral behavior (Kavussanu, et al., 2013). This form of antisocial behavior was also deemed to be less wrong in sport than life, replicating the game reasoning phenomenon reported by Bredemeir and Shields (1984, 1986a, 1986b) and Bredemeir (1994, 1995). In contrast, intended and past antisocial behavior directed towards teammates were less likely when playing sport than the equivalent criticizing behavior directed towards students at university providing evidence for bracketed moral behavior (Kavussanu, et al., 2013). That this form of antisocial behavior was also

deemed to be more wrong in sport than life appears, at least at first glance, to be directly at odds with game reasoning as originally reported (Bredemeir & Shields, 1984, 1986a, 1986b). These contrasting effects highlight the importance of the in-group/out-group status of the recipient of the conduct. The discrepancy observed in bracketed morality between antisocial behavior toward opponents/students and antisocial behavior toward teammates/students may be explained at least in part by the psychology (e.g., Hewstone, et al, 2002; Tajfel, et al, 1971) and morality (e.g., Graham, et al., 2013) of groups. People act favorably toward members of their group due to in-group loyalty and unfavorably towards outsiders due to out-group betrayal (e.g., Allport, 1954; Brewer, 2007). In sport, opponents may be viewed as outsiders who can be harmed for the benefit of the in-group whereas teammates may be viewed as insiders who should not be harmed to ensure in-group cohesion. In sum, our understanding of game reasoning and bracketed morality surrounding issues of harm/care (as well as other moral foundations) can be improved by recognizing the moderating influence on moral thought and action of the principle of in-group loyalty versus out-group betrayal.

Group dynamics can also explain contextual differences in reasoning about and performance of prosocial deeds. Moral reasoning about the perceived immorality of failing to stop and help someone revealed that inaction was deemed less wrong in sport compared to everyday life. This effect for moral reasoning in this altruistic dilemma was predictive of future inaction in such as situation and past inaction in similar situations. Taken together these data replicate the game reasoning (Bredemeir, 1994, 1995; Bredemeir & Shields, 1984, 1986a, 1986b) and game behavior (Kavussanu et al., 2013) noted in previous research. As above, these findings can explained by group dynamics: caring may be an manifestation of in-group loyalty in sport and lack of caring an expression of out-group prejudice (e.g., Brewer, 2007; Graham, et al., 2013). Specifically, when playing sport, the team's opponents

may be viewed as outsiders who do not need to be cared for as doing may not be beneficial or may perhaps be detrimental to the goals of the in-group.

The current findings imply that our moral thoughts and actions when we enter different social contexts may be manifestations of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation. Moreover, our understanding of athletes as saints and sinners can be improved by appreciating the full complexity of the group environment in which they find themselves. The *theory of game reasoning* could be updated to incorporate the new evidence presented here. Moreover, it remains to be determined whether individual differences in the moral self, such as moral identity (Smith, Aquino, Koleva, & Graham, 2014), moral disengagement (Kavussanu, Ring, & Kavanagh, 2014), and moral emotions (Proios, 2012), may mitigate and moderate bracketed morality.

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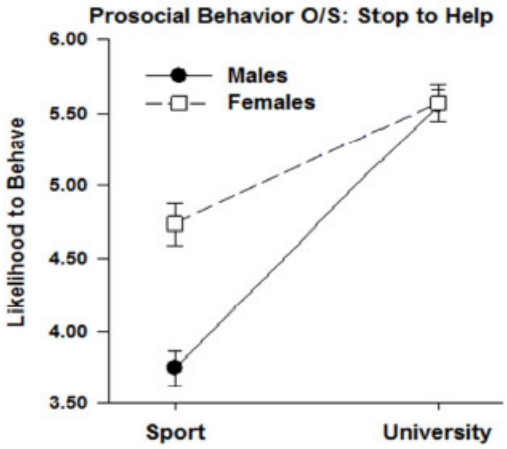
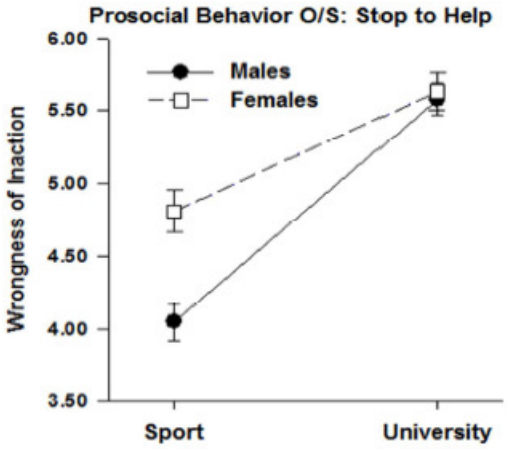
Table 1

Summary	**Analyses**	**Comparing**	**Sport**	**School**	**Contexts**	**In**	**and**
Dilemma /				*Factor*			
Behavior		Context		Gender		Context	Gender
		$F(1, 370)$	η^2	$F(1, 370)$	η^2	$F(1,$	η^2
				Likelihood	to Behave		
AB O/S:	Intimidate	10.55 ***	.028	31.72 ***	.079	1.22	.003
AB TM/S:	Criticize	17.47 ***	.045	2.83	.008	1.07	.003
PB O/S:	Stop to	133.38 ***	.265	13.99 ***	.036	17.89	.046
PB O/S:	Lend	0.76	.002	2.97	.008	0.08	.000
				Wrongness	of		
AB O/S:	Intimidate	16.78 ***	.043	46.54 ***	.112	0.63	.002
AB TM/S:	Criticize	0.34	.001	2.96	.008	3.43	.009
PB O/S:	Stop to	103.31 ***	.218	8.44 **	.022	9.37	.025
PB O/S:	Lend	9.05 **	.024	4.50 *	.012	0.87	.002
				Past			
AB O/S:	Intimidate	93.32 ***	.205	10.96 ***	.029	11.60	.030
AB TM/S:	Criticize	19.60 ***	.050	11.57 ***	.030	0.52	.001
PB O/S:	Stop to	15.35 ***	.040	12.11 ***	.032	0.70	.002

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. AB = antisocial behavior, PB = prosocial behavior, O/S = opponent/student, TM/S = teammate/student


Prosocial Behavior O/S: Stop to Help
Likelihood to Behave
6.00
5.50
5.00
4.50
4.00
3.50
Males
Females
Sport
University


Prosocial Behavior O/S: Stop to Help
Wrongness of Inaction
6.00
5.50
5.00
4.50
4.00
3.50
Males
Females
Sport
University